

**Military Rule in Argentina, 1976-1983:  
Suppressing the Peronists**

by

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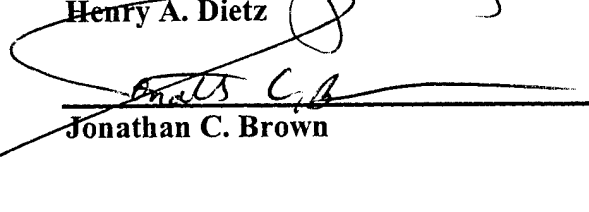
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## Dedication

*para mis padres, Antonio y Adelina, quienes siempre me inculcaron el valor de  
ser un hombre educado*

That which my father aspired for me, I now aspire for you Celina: *que seas más  
de lo que yo fui y nunca olvides el valor de ser una persona educada.*

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Last, but certainly not least, I would be remiss if I did not express the immense gratitude I have for my love, my partner, my friend, my lovely wife, Cheryl. Thank you sweetheart for your love, support, understanding, and encouragement, I could not have done this without you – I love you dearly.

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# **Military Rule in Argentina, 1976-1983: Suppressing the Peronists**

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Using Robert Dahl's basic axiom that a government will increasingly tolerate opposition if the expected costs of suppressing the opposition increases, the author shows that the Peronist movement became the primary opposition to the military regime that ruled Argentina from 1976-1983. The military engaged in the "Dirty War" in order to suppress its opposition, principally the Peronists, because the cost – measured in terms of legitimacy – of suppressing them was relatively low at the beginning of the junta's rule. But the cost of suppression increased over time because of the military regime's ruthless suppression of anyone who opposed it, its failed economic policies, and its embarrassing loss of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War, and thus it had to tolerate its opposition and eventually return power to civilian authority.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

After deposing President Isabel Perón from office on March 24, 1976, the Argentine military junta ruled the country as an authoritarian regime for nearly seven years. The military did not take its action without substantial support of the people: nearly all the upper class, large numbers of the middle and lower classes, and surprisingly enough, even leaders of the deposed president's own party, the Peronistas, supported the coup d'état.<sup>1</sup> An ongoing and escalating guerrilla war in the urban areas, hyperinflation of 450 percent, and the inability of Isabel Perón to govern made Argentina a chaotic and unstable country. During the seven years the military regime was in power, it sought to end the insurgency war, fix the economy and reorganize society.

The officers who led the coup and subsequently ruled the country believed it was their solemn duty to protect their country from the "ineptness" of civilian rule. In fact, the military had previously intervened eight times since 1900, giving the armed forces the institutional knowledge and willingness to overthrow governments they believed to be inefficient. Eric Nordlinger argues that, "praetorians portray themselves as responsible and patriotic officers... [and]

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<sup>1</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, Area Handbook Series (Washington, 1985) p.245, and George Philip, "The Fall of the Argentine Military," *Third World Quarterly*, 6, 3 (1984), p.627.

take it upon themselves to decide if the constitution has been violated or the national interest subverted, and thus whether or not intervention is warranted.”<sup>2</sup> Believing the national interest had indeed been subverted, the officers legitimized their actions based on what they perceived to be in the best interest of the nation. Though the extent of (or lack of) legitimacy a military regime has upon an undemocratic assumption of power is worthy of debate, quite frankly it is beyond the scope of this thesis. I shall assume that the military believed it had the right to intervene for the sake of *la patria*, as Brian Loveman puts it, and sought to legitimize itself to the citizens of Argentina once it was in power, while it simultaneously suppressed its opponents through violent means.<sup>3</sup>

In his often quoted and studied work on democratization, Robert Dahl proposes three axioms that pertain to a government’s toleration for its opponents. Critical to Dahl’s work is the basic concept that in order for democracy to exist, there must be participation and contestation. Participation refers to the active participation of a citizenry to have a say in their government, be it their involvement in elections by voting, or their ability to let their government know

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Englewood Cliffs, 1977), p. 19. Nordlinger refers to military officers as praetorians when they are major or predominant political actors by virtue of their actual or perceived use of force, thus officers who participate in the military intervention of a government are considered praetorian soldiers.

<sup>3</sup> See Brian Loveman, *For la patria, Politics and the Armed Forces in Latin America* (Wilmington, 1999), for an in-depth explanation. Basically he argues that the military in Latin America sees itself as the undisputed guardian of its nation (*la patria*) against any and all internal and external threats.

their preferences in policy making. The other, contestation, is the ability of the citizenry to question and oppose the government in its policy making and its power over its citizens. Thus a democracy must have both high levels of participation and contestation. Contestation poses perhaps the more problematic proposition for a government wishing to remain in power. After all, by allowing opposition, a government may very well lose power. Contestation by its nature causes conflict between those in power and those wishing to assume power. "Thus the greater the conflict between government and opposition, the more likely that each will seek to deny opportunities to the other to participate effectively in policymaking. To put it another way, the greater the conflict between a government and its opponents, the more costly it is for each to tolerate the other."<sup>4</sup> From this notion, Dahl then formulates the following three axioms:

AXIOM 1. The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of toleration decrease.

AXIOM 2. The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of suppression increase.

AXIOM 3. The more the costs of suppression exceed the costs of toleration, the greater the chance for a competitive regime.

For the military authoritarian regime that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, the government suppressed its opponents, principally the Peronists, more at the start

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<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, 1971), p. 15.

of its rule, than it did toward the end of it. If Dahl's axioms are valid, then what were the increasing costs of suppression that caused the military junta to increase its toleration for its opposition? And why did the regime meet its demise despite its apparent attempts to tolerate opposition and to save the nation from political implosion, especially toward the end of its rule?

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that Dahl's axiom 2 – the likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of suppression increase – not only holds true in the Argentine case, but that it provides the means for analyzing and understanding why the military acted as it did. Cost can be measured in many ways. For this thesis, I will measure cost in terms of the military's legitimacy<sup>5</sup> to hold power. If the military has high legitimacy then cost is low; if the military's legitimacy is challenged, reduced, or lost, then cost increases and becomes high. The other two axioms also hold true by inference. Although most writers concentrate on the ability of military rule to manage the state, I instead focus on the inverse relationship between tolerance and suppression, as described by Dahl. I would predict finding that the military regime in Argentina suppressed its opposition by means of an internal political and ideological cleansing, commonly referred to as the "Dirty War," and that the

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term legitimacy throughout this thesis as Kenneth Baynes describes it in Joel Krieger's (ed.) book, *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (New York, 1993), as a concept that refers to a political order's worthiness to be recognized as a political power.

costs of doing so were relatively low shortly after the junta assumed power. As the regime increasingly lost legitimacy and support because of its failed economic policies, the increasingly ruthless nature of its suppression, and finally its failure in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War, the costs of suppression increased to the point where it had to tolerate its opposition.

My thesis is divided into six chapters. Having introduced the topic, general concepts and the theoretical model in Chapter One, Chapter Two begins by putting the Argentina case into a historical dimension. Concentrating on the development of Juan Domingo Perón's political power, his influence on national politics, and his impact on the labor movement, I show why Peronism and its followers posed a threat to the military institution, how it splintered into revolutionary movements and caused the military to intervene in 1976, and why its members became the main targets of the "Dirty War" during the military's rule. Expanding upon the historical foundation built in the previous chapter, the third chapter describes the military regime's opposition. The focus is on the social unrest that guerrilla and militant groups caused, linking Peronists to such groups, and showing that they posed the greatest opposition to the military. It is my contention that the military designed the counterinsurgency "dirty" war to eliminate the Peronist opposition. Chapter Four deals with the economy. It gives a brief historical background and the origins of Argentina's dependency on

foreign capital, traces the significant economic ups and downs from 1930 to 1976, then covers the military's basic economic policies from 1976 to 1983, and finally explains why the military regime of 1976 failed economically. In Chapter Five I examine the United Kingdom and Argentina's claim to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands by giving a history of the discovery and re-discovery of the islands from the 1400s, analyze why the military engaged in the war, and discuss the results of their embarrassing defeat in the war. Finally, Chapter Six draws on the entire work to show how and why Dahl's theoretical proposition – that a government will increasingly tolerate opposition if the expected costs of suppressing the opposition increase – applies to the Argentina case.

## Chapter 2: The Military Takes Power

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PERÓN'S LEGACY

To understand the troubles facing Argentina when the armed forces deposed the president in 1976, one must be familiar with Juan Domingo Perón. The reason is quite simple: Juan Perón changed Argentine politics forever. He entered military service in 1915 following his graduation from the Military College, and served in various assignments until he eventually became a history teacher at the Superior War College, the position in which he was serving when General José F. Uriburu overthrew the civilian government in 1930. After several more military uprisings during that same year, the military finally returned the government to civilian authorities. From 1930 to 1943, a conservative coalition called the *Concordancia* dominated Argentinean politics. This group of conservative professional politicians was known for its fraudulent elections, corrupt practices and repressive tendencies. Fed up with the manner in which the *Concordancia* governed, in 1943 the *Grupo de Oficiales Unidos* (Group of United Officers) seized power from the civilian government and General Arturo J. Rawson assumed control. For his involvement in the planning and execution of the coup, the new heads of the military junta appointed Perón as the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, pp.47-51.



In his position as Labor Minister, Perón amassed tremendous popular support, especially among urban workers. Argentina's industrial development during the 1930s had stimulated the need for inexpensive labor and accelerated migration from rural areas to cities like Buenos Aires and Córdoba. Previously, as early as the late 1800s, labor had struggled to obtain increased wages and better working conditions from their employers. They found that unionization helped articulate their needs to an often-uncaring government. Perón changed the government's attitude toward the working class while serving as the Minister of Labor by pushing legislation to establish industrial wage scales, improve working class conditions, lower public transport fares, freeze rents, provide vacation pay and control food prices. Catering to the fundamental bread and butter issues that appealed to the masses, Perón gained the loyalty of the working class, especially rank-and-file workers. In the period 1936-1943, 90 percent of union membership came about because of communist-led organizing efforts. However, most workers abandoned communist-led labor movements in order to follow Perón and his ideals. As James Brennan asserts, "Perón's greatest legacy to the working class... was the creation of a unified and powerful labor movement."<sup>7</sup> Although previous union efforts had given workers the ability to change their working conditions, Perón's actions in government gave the workers' movement legality

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<sup>7</sup> James P. Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Cordoba, 1955-1976: Ideology, Work and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 10.

and political power. Thus the political balance changed forever because workers could now oppose the government, make demands upon it, and have an affect on national politics. When the military regime arrested Perón – the military distrusted him for his populist behavior – mass rallies of *descamisados* (an epithet for the urban poor literally meaning the “shirtless ones”) pressured the military to release him from jail. Upon his release, Perón immediately began organizing for the 1946 presidential elections.

With the support of the working classes, Perón became president with a 54 percent majority of the vote. His first administration – he won a second term in office in 1952 after conveniently changing the constitution to allow immediate re-elections – was quite successful. The government received a steady flow of income from exports to foreign nations during World War II; especially busy were Argentine meat producers and industrialists. Showing strong nationalism, Perón paid cash for the British railways within Argentina, reclaimed foreign owned assets, and paid off the national foreign debt. Additionally, he instituted costly state sponsored welfare programs that greatly benefited the popular classes. His second administration was not nearly as successful as his first. With the Second World War over, demand for Argentine exports shrank, as did its economy. Faced with increasing inflation, Perón instituted austerity measures to stabilize the economy; the working class immediately felt the effects. When he

began privatizing state industries, Perón alienated himself from some of the country's left-wing interest groups. Already on the outs with the right, the actions of radical Peronist congressmen in stripping the Catholic Church of long-standing powers and privileges further increased Perón's estrangement from the right. As is common with populist leaders, Perón became more and more authoritarian; he restricted the unions, censored the press, and upset the military establishment through his personalistic actions toward the armed forces. As an example of the extent of his military personalism, he made *doctrina peronista* a mandatory part of the curriculum at the military academy and the *Escuela Superior de Guerra* (Superior War College), required loyalty tests for promotion, and had two top-ranking officers who were personally loyal to him monitor troops for any signs of disaffection.<sup>8</sup> Supported by the country's elite, the military expelled Perón from office in September 1955 and consequently solidified a long-term hostility between the military and Perón and his followers.

#### LABOR AND LEFTIST RADICALISM

Radicalism and militancy greatly increased within labor and social movements after Perón went into exile. During *la Resistencia* (1955-1973), worker's protests reached epidemic levels and gradually became more militant, violent, and revolutionary in nature. Strikes in the Federal Capital alone caused

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<sup>8</sup> David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonialization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 305.

5 million lost labor days in 1956, 3.3 million in 1957, 6 million in 1958 and 10 million in 1959<sup>9</sup>; every person in Buenos Aires felt the civil disruption that the strikes caused. The two most shocking strikes occurred in Córdoba: the *Cordobazo* in 1969, and the *viborazo* in 1971. These strikes literally shut down the second largest city in Argentina. The strikes, whose participants included students, workers, and local business owners, caused the fall of two military governments, the Onganía administration of 1966-70, and the Levingston government of 1970-71.

Peronist rank-and-file workers became self-reliant and militant during *la Resistencia* resulting in violent conflicts among themselves, fellow workers, management, and with their union leadership. During the early 1960s, a division emerged between those Peronists who wanted to reach an agreement with the government and those who did not. Furthermore, when union leadership and more radical youth sectors within the unions disagreed upon the direction of the labor movement, the youth organized into various guerrilla movements: the People's Revolutionary Army, the Peronist Armed Forces, the Revolutionary Armed Forces, and the Montoneros (I discuss these factions in greater detail in the next chapter). Peronist workers primarily sought employee benefits, improved

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 113.

working conditions, and control of their workplaces, whereas the Peronist guerrilla movements sought social revolution. There was at best a fine line between activism for labor reform and activism for revolution. Since the laborers and the guerrillas were so closely associated – the latter eventually becoming the self-appointed protectors and avengers of the former – from the government's perspective and those not directly involved in labor or social movements, the two became indistinguishable. Between 1966 and the early 1970s the government passed laws proscribing subversion and communism; militants suffered routine abductions, arrests, torture, and assassinations. In 1970 when guerrillas assassinated the former military president, General Aramburu, the military regime lashed out ever more harshly against its opponents. This reaction of course further fueled the opposition's rancor against the military regime and increased their militancy.

From the time the military junta assumed power in 1955 until 1973, there were six coups: Juan Perón (1955), General Lonardi (also in 1955), Arturo Frondizi (1962), Arturo Illia (1966), General Onganía (1970), and General Levingston (1971). During this period, the "men on horseback" disbanded the Peronist party and made it illegal. Thus the connections among Perón, the Peronist party, labor, and some guerrilla groups all converged because Perón had changed Argentine politics forever by giving the working class political power.

Through its work stoppages, strikes, militancy, and resolve, the working class made its political power known time and again to the military and the elites. The military regime suppressed its opposition, mainly Peronist party members and their supporters, until the instability they caused through their militancy was too high for the military to control. Therefore, when General Lanusse called for civilian elections in 1973 – the military regime had previously permitted two civilian elections without Peronist participation, one in 1958 (Arturo Frondizi) and the other in 1963 (Arturo Illia) – he finally tolerated and allowed a Peronist candidate to run for the presidency.

Perón's hand picked candidate, Héctor Campora, won the presidency in 1973 with 49.5 percent of the vote. Perón himself could not run as the candidate because having been in exile for eighteen years he did not meet residency requirements. Upon Perón's triumphant return, a series of well-staged uprisings by Peronistas "forced" Campora to resign, and his vice president called for immediate elections. Not surprising, in October of 1973, Juan Perón won his third presidency with 62 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup>

The Argentina Perón presided over was not the same it had been when he had last been president some eighteen years earlier. Perón attempted to unify the

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<sup>10</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, pp. 64-65.

labor movement as he once had, and sought to reconcile the military establishment with the masses. Unfortunately for him, these tasks were not easy. The labor movement had undergone several changes in the nearly two decades he was in exile. Now more militant, aligned with radical socialist groups, and filled with Marxist ideology, they were not as easily co-opted as before.<sup>11</sup> Even his brokered deal between labor and business to establish wage and price policy, the *Pacto Social*, had only short-term success. The economy again began collapsing due to worldwide increases in oil prices, among other things, and so he borrowed foreign money to stimulate the economy but it only created greater budget deficits. Worker's wages constantly lost value in comparison with the increasing cost of living, causing labor and the more militant students and intellectuals to demonstrate openly in the streets. Perón finally took action against them: "popular demonstrations became illegal and subject to police intervention; political exiles were repatriated or repressed in Argentina; and the media were placed under state control."<sup>12</sup> Shortly after instituting these measures, Juan Domingo Perón died suddenly on July 1, 1974. The vice-president, whom was also Perón's third wife, María Estela (Isabel) Martínez de Peron, assumed the presidency.

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed accounting of the labor movement's radicalization, see Richard Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón: Argentina's Montoneros* (New York, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 65.

## FROM BAD TO WORSE: ISABEL PERÓN'S PRESIDENCY

Unlike Juan Perón's second wife Evita – who was extremely popular and politically savvy – Isabel Perón's inexperience in politics and government made her an ineffective president. A failing economy and rising anarchy led to a deepening of the state's instability. To make matters worst, she chose José López Rega as her advisor. A former police officer, Rega had a reputation for his interest in the occult and his support of dissident Catholic groups; his position as advisor to the president did not sit well with conservatives, least of all with senior military leaders.<sup>13</sup> To their surprise, however, Rega advised Isabel to take a tough stand against the left. The administration appointed conservatives to the Ministry of Education and in particular to the University of Buenos Aires in order to rid those institutions of leftists. When Rega formed the *Alianza Argentina Anticomunista* (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, or AAA) as a rightist civilian paramilitary organization to counter the left, terrorism and open urban warfare ensued. With the help of state police, "the AAA embarked on a ferocious

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<sup>13</sup> The military did not trust Rega; as Rosendo Fraga argues, the majority of military officers did not want to participate in the fight against the guerrilla movement as it had in 1971 and 1973, saying it was an affair for the police, since the military was not properly trained for that mission. However, after the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* conducted reprisal attacks on officers, their wives, and their children, the military pressed Isabel Perón for greater involvement in the counter-guerrilla fight. Rosendo Fraga, *Ejército: del escarnio al poder (1973-1976)* (Buenos Aires, 1988), pp. 275-276.



campaign to liquidate Perón's 'special forces;' by the end of 1975, it had carried out some 2,000 political assassinations."<sup>14</sup>

In an attempt to stabilize the economy, Isabel's administration passed economic policies that froze wages and devalued its currency in hopes of attracting foreign investment. These policies of course caused labor to react negatively, since their wages could not keep up with the rate of inflation. Growing increasingly impatient, the leading national labor union organization, the *Confederación General de Trabajo* (CGT), and the military continued to pressure the administration. In response to the apparent lack of governmental political control and a failing economy, terrorist attacks began to rise dramatically. By December 1975, inflation was at a staggering 350 percent. The military issued an ultimatum: fix the problems or we will.

Ninety days after issuing the ultimatum, and as the CGT was demanding her resignation, the military commanders removed Isabel Perón from the presidency in a bloodless coup d'état. Deborah Norden summarizes the military's plan to remove Isabel Perón from office as follows:

The military coup of March 1976 surprised no one. Nonetheless, certain particulars about the event should be mentioned. To begin with, the 1976 coup was the most clearly professionalist instance

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<sup>14</sup> David Pion-Berlin, *The Ideology of State Terror: Economic Doctrine and Political Repression in Argentina and Peru* (Boulder, 1989), p. 87.

of military intervention in Argentine history. The organizers were the leaders of the three armed forces, not members of less-favored factions competing for a share of the power. They thus acted according to military norms of hierarchy, thereby facilitating the task of achieving a following. The leaders also represented the political center of the armed forces, rather than either the left or right. Finally, the leaders of the coup – General Videla, Admiral Emilio Eduardo Massera, and Brigadier Orlando Ramón Agosti – reportedly were reluctant to instate a military government, despite the encouragement they were receiving from various members of the political community. The coup coalition was consolidated only after various members of the military were thwarted in their efforts to provoke impeachment proceedings.<sup>15</sup>

Most observers, within and outside of the country, expected the coup because a large number of interest groups – the landed elite, the business community, most of the middle and working classes, major newspapers, the Church, the Radical Party, and even leaders within the Peronist Party – had indicated to the military that they wanted it to intervene. The violence, political chaos, and economic ruin had finally taken their toll and it was the military establishment that society called upon to “save” *la patria*.

#### **THE MILITARY JUNTA’S OBJECTIVES**

The military junta’s stated objectives were to restore national security, stabilize the economy, institute authentic representative democracy, and return proper moral values.<sup>16</sup> First and foremost, the military wanted to eradicate the

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<sup>15</sup>Deborah L. Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina: Between Coups and Consolidation* (Lincoln, 1996), p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> David Pion-Berlin, “The Fall of Military Rule in Argentina: 1976-1983,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 27 (1985), p. 57.

guerrilla movements and rid the country of the Peronist party. From the military's perspective, Peronism had brought decades of populist-created chaos. Although the Peronists had gone through several permutations, the military insisted that the resulting guerrilla/revolutionary groups were a product of the original "poison" Juan Perón had given to the country. By linking the Peronists with the guerrillas and subsequently eliminating them as opponents, the military believed the latter two objectives – instituting authentic democracy and returning moral values to the country – would naturally follow. The solution to the social unrest was a counterinsurgency war.

By the time the junta took over the seat of government, the foreign debt was at \$10 billion, there was a deficit of 15 percent of the gross national product, and the annual rate of inflation had reached 3,000 percent on several occasions.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the next most important objective was to fix the economy. The military claimed that only by embracing and pursuing a free market economy, instead of the inefficient state controlled market, could Argentina's economy grow. Instituting austerity measures – reducing the deficit and controlling demand with wage cuts to curb inflation – would surely attract much needed foreign investment.

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Monteón, "Can Argentina's Democracy Survive Economic Disaster?" in *From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina*, eds. Monica Peralta-Ramos and Carlos H. Waisman (Boulder, 1987), p. 25.

To institute “real” democracy and “appropriate” values, the military attempted to normalize political life and re-organize society. Typical of an authoritarian regime, it abolished political parties, suspended Congress, dismissed supreme court justices, banned strikes and demonstrations, froze union bank accounts, and threatened/used force and police action to suppress opposition, especially opposition from the left and specifically opposition from the Peronists. These last two objectives closely resembled objective number one: eliminate social unrest.

#### **CONCLUSION: THE BLOODLESS COUP**

After decades of political and social unrest, in 1976 the Argentinean military decided to again try its hand at government before the nation imploded. Their involvement in politics had historically been one of safeguarding *la patria*; intervening by way of a coup d'état was nothing new to military officers. As Brian Loveman generalizes about the armed forces in Latin America, they believed that “[t]emporary military rule [was] justified by ‘necessity,’ by [their] role as guardians of the nation’s destiny, by their historical identity with the nation in its creation and formation, and by their undecidable mission (*misión indeclinable*) as the ultimate bastion of their nation’s sovereignty.”<sup>18</sup>

The rise of Juan Perón to national politics indeed changed politics in Argentina forever. The masses saw Perón as a savior, someone who truly cared

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<sup>18</sup> Brian Loveman, *For la patria, Politics and the Armed Forces in Latin America* (Wilmington, 1999), p. xv.

about them, someone who made a difference in their lives by providing much needed social programs and, especially during his first administration, someone who could instill national pride. This populist leader governed in a personalistic and authoritarian manner until the military removed him in 1955. Since he had built a large and fervent following, particularly among the working classes, his removal from office infuriated the masses. What had been worker strikes and protests for bread and butter issues eventually became revolts for the right to control their own workplaces and gain political power. Their demonstrations increased in militancy during *la Resistencia* (1955-1973) and caused several governments to topple because of their ability to organize and pressure the government. Unfortunately, their actions became increasingly violent, despite the return of their "savior" from exile in 1973. Not even Perón could control the masses as he had done during his 1946-1955 presidency. Dying suddenly in 1976, his wife and vice president, Isabel Perón took office.

The result was escalating social unrest. Radical union members, guerrilla groups, the military and paramilitary units clashed in the countryside and the streets of urban areas. Terrorist attacks on both sides became endemic. Because of her inability to rule the country due to her inexperience, in a bloodless coup, the soldiers removed Isabel Perón from power in March 1976. The violence had reached such an intolerable level that various groups in society practically insisted

that the military take over the government. Economic ruin and chaotic civil unrest were the two issues the newly established military junta aimed to fix, emphasizing especially the latter. "Beginning now, this newly assumed responsibility imposes on the authorities the rigorous task of eradicating, once and for all, the vices which afflict the nation. To achieve that, we will continue fighting, without quarter, all forms of subversion, both open and clandestine, and will eradicate all forms of demagoguery," announced the three commanders responsible for the coup, General Videla, Admiral Massera, and Brigadier Agosti, over the radio on March 25, 1976.<sup>19</sup> Setting their objectives, the military regime embarked on a path to economic recovery, social pacification, and societal reorganization. What the nation actually got was nearly seven years of severe repression, failed economic policies, and a military whose image is still tarnished.

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<sup>19</sup> Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies, Jr., eds., *The Politics of Antipolitics: The Military in Latin America* (Wilmington, 1997), p. 159.

## Chapter 3: The Opposition

### POLITICAL MENTALITIES IN ARGENTINA

Argentina was in a state of chaos when the military junta assumed control of the government in 1976. Civil unrest had not developed in a vacuum, nor had it suddenly emerged. As discussed in Chapter Two, militancy slowly grew out of discontent for inefficient government, depressed economic realities, and a politically charged social movement in which Peronism was a major factor. Certainly there were many political actors and groups whose interplay contributed to political conflict; all sought to establish their own ideas of what they believed Argentina should become. Generally, these actors and groups fell into one of four political mentalities: conservatism, radicalism, nationalism and Peronism. "Analysts described these sets of ideas as political mentalities rather than as ideologies because, with few exceptions, they were not based on formal written political theory."<sup>20</sup> Here I cover each group briefly by identifying its fundamental make-up, its general ideas, and its relationship with the armed forces. However, the focus of this chapter will be on Peronism since the Peronists were the primary opponents to the military regime in the period of 1976-1983, and were the group most suppressed by the regime.

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<sup>20</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 216.

The conservatives were largely made up of the traditional landed aristocracy (including ranchers and agricultural producers), domestic industrialists, and financial institutions. This group believed in "free trade, export-led growth, openness to foreign investment, and a further integration into the global trade and monetary system."<sup>21</sup> It was this group that strongly supported military intervention when other political groups threatened their interests, mainly economic in nature. At times the Catholic Church and parts of the middle-class joined this group in order to oppose leftist or popular movements. This group had a favorable relationship with the military, especially when the 1976 coup took place. Since many military officers held similar conservative views, conservatism was highly compatible with military rule.

Radicalism emerged as an opposition group to the oligarchy as early as the 1890s. Although the Radicals<sup>22</sup> – uniting and establishing the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR) in 1891 – did not have a drastically different political view from that of the conservatives in terms of economy and institutional structures, they did seek to give the middle-class greater political opportunities. They particularly

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Here I capitalize the word Radical to distinguish between the political party group and a group of radical ideologies or actions, for which I use the lower case. In fact, the Radicals addressed in this part were not radical in the strict sense of the word; instead they were quite conservative politically. They were labeled Radical for their departure from the elitist Argentine politics of the nineteenth century. In order to gain power, they advocated less restrictive suffrage to give the middle classes more political opportunities, but they did not want to strip the landed elites of power.



supported free and honest elections, and free-market economics, but desired greater distribution of wealth and power to the middle classes. "By the 1960s Radicalism was supported by most merchants and professionals, as well as by some industrialists producing for the domestic market."<sup>23</sup> This group's relationship with the military varied. During the 1955 coup that toppled Juan Perón, for example, the Radicals supported the military because they opposed the reforms Perón instituted that strengthened labor's political power while weakening their own. However, a smaller group of Radicals – those that were more traditional in their party's goals of free and open elections – opposed the military's proscription of the Peronist Party and refused to run for or hold public office. The UCR split into various groups, eventually organizing around personality rather than ideological differences; by 1965, there were an estimated 225 Radical parties.<sup>24</sup> During the 1976 coup, large numbers of this group supported the military's actions because they were fed up with the rampant political violence.<sup>25</sup>

Nationalists were perhaps the most varied in terms of their composition. Supporters ranged from Marxists to segments of the military. Beginning in the

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<sup>23</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> María José Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol: Armed Struggle, 1969-1979* (New Haven, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis R. Gordon, "Withdrawal in Disgrace: Decline of the Argentine Military, 1976-1983." in *The Decline of Military Regimes: The Civilian Influence*, ed. Constantine P. Donopoulos, (Boulder, 1988), p. 208.

1920s, the original nationalists grew from militant Roman Catholics who were concerned with the decay of the governing institutions of society and their lack of the requisite “divinely inspired moral foundations” to govern.<sup>26</sup> They believed in a state that ruled through a clerical-military organization, with strong authoritarianism and corporatism. This sector of nationalists had a good relationship with the military. Another faction of this group began in the 1930s with military officers and middle-class intellectuals who were concerned about too much foreign intervention – particularly British – in state enterprises and affairs. Perón’s first administration was representative of this mentality. Clearly this sector had a key relationship with the military since it gave prominence to *la patria*, something the armed forces valued. Socialist and communist organizations emerged as early as the late 1800s, but gained only moderate support amongst the popular classes and students in the twentieth century. They supported the 1955 coup since Perón had taken worker’s support from them. In the 1960s Onganía’s military regime outlawed them, but during the 1976 coup, their relationship with the military was once again favorable since they condemned guerrilla violence in the 1970s. The most extreme nationalists were individuals opposed to imperialistic relationships, especially with the United States, who drew upon neo-Marxist thought in the 1970s. This group sought changes to the social and economic structural status quo and was at odds with the

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<sup>26</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 221.

military. The *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) grew out of this group and would become one of the two major guerilla forces that the 1976 junta combated, the other force, the Montoneros, surfaced from the Peronists.

The Peronists have always been a complicated and evolutionary group. Founded by Juan Perón during the 1940s as an attempt to conciliate Argentina's social classes through a doctrine of *Justicialismo* – the “fair” distribution of wealth, creation of government supported social programs, and participation in government for and by the working classes – Peronism gave the Argentinean labor movement true political power. Since governmental opposition had traditionally been between the conservatives and the Radicals, in essence Perón changed the political power structure in the country by empowering the working classes. This new political structure created a cleavage between those that supported Perón and those that opposed him. A country study published by the United States government concluded that:

Despite this fundamental cleavage between Peronism and anti-Peronism, there was little agreement among analysts or among Argentines about what Peronism was. All agreed that it was a mass movement, but few could agree on its exact nature. For some it was working-class movement seeking social justice; for others it was a multiclass alliance seeking industrialization or a revolutionary movement seeking a transformation of the economy and society toward socialism; and for still others it was a political machine designed to further the personal political and financial ambitions of Perón. Regardless of its true nature, however, it was clear that from 1943 through the 1970s Peronism was supported by

a clear majority of the population. The movement won every free election in which it was allowed to run between 1946 and 1976.<sup>27</sup>

The reason why the pundits are unable to agree on Peronism's exact nature is because it fits all three of the explanations given above. Constantly evolving, Peronism took the character of any group, particularly those on the political fringe, which advocated its political goals. Peronism eventually became the primary opposition of the military government that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 because it became radicalized, split into armed factions, and caused social and political instability in the country. A more detailed analysis of the militant and guerrilla opposition can provide evidence that Peronists became the chief target of the military's suppression.

#### **THE EVOLUTION OF PERONISM**

Perón created a corporatist state during his first two administrations (1946-1955). His greatest accomplishment was the unification of the labor movement; virtually the entire working class abandoned its previous socialist and communist leadership and followed Perón for the simple reason that he gave it political power.<sup>28</sup> Another part of Peronism's original followers were industrialists who benefited from state controlled market economics, military leaders who wanted to link industrialization with national power, the middle classes of the interior parts

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 222.

<sup>28</sup> Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, p. 25.

of the country, and white collar government workers who benefited from Perón's expansion of the state.<sup>29</sup> After the military overthrew Perón in 1955, primarily working class individuals made up the Peronist movement. Most, though not all, of the middle-class and industrialists abandoned the movement because they felt their interests were not being met. They saw their relative social status reduced as the status of the working class increased: wages between the two classes became nearly indistinguishable.

During Perón's exile, Peronism split into various organizations. In the 1960s, the first divide occurred between union leaders, who refused to accept government without Perón, and neo-Peronists, who were more willing to reach an agreement with the governments of Frondizi and Illia. The neo-Peronists viewed political gain as paramount – in spite of going against Perón's orders to oppose the military regime and civilian governments – to their political survival. By reaching agreements with the government they could hold political office. Perón's "decision to reconstitute the Justicialist Party in early 1964 did much to weaken the position of the neo-Peronists which depended on their ability to present themselves to the authorities as the only legally constituted, moderate political body of Peronism."<sup>30</sup> The neo-Peronists, after meeting with Perón in

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<sup>29</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 223.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 178.

Madrid and an electoral judge's refusal to grant the Justicialist Party legitimacy, reached a compromise with the union leaders and together they were able to win numerous provincial assembly elections. The *Cordobazo* of 1969 brought yet another division, this time between the traditional labor union sector and the more radical and militant youth sector. Whilst the CGT leadership planned a general work strike, rank-and-file workers and students in Córdoba rebelled against the Onganía regime. The effect of the *Cordobazo* – which toppled the Onganía dictatorship – was to give rank-and-file workers and youth a taste for successful radical action. Splitting from the traditional Peronist axiom of conciliation, the radical youth sector formed various guerrilla and militant groups – the Montoneros, the *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas* (Peronist Armed Forces), the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (People's Revolutionary Army), and the *Juventud Peronista* (Peronist Youth) – that initially aimed to replace Peronism. Unable to do so, the groups later infiltrated the Peronist coalition with the intent of abandoning class conciliation and instead beginning a socialist revolution.<sup>31</sup>

#### **GUERRILLA AND MILITANT GROUPS**

Obviously not all workers, unionists, or Peronists were guerrillas or active enemies of the state. Indeed, many of them had grown militant in their demonstrations for bread and butter issues and political power, but the guerrilla

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<sup>31</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 224.

groups that evolved over time surfaced from the radicalized labor movement. Older labor movement members and even CGT union leaders were content with compromising and participating in the political/governance process, but the youth was not. The emergence of the Peronist Left occurred, according to Richard Gillespie, due to Peronists', especially the youth's, reactions to several factors: 1) economic depression in which worker's salaries lost significant purchasing power between 1955 and 1972; 2) betrayal by the Frondizi government that had promised to legitimize the Peronist party, but recanted because of military pressure; 3) Peronism's split into various organizations; 4) the impact of the 1959 Cuban Revolution; and 5) Perón's own encouragement for his supporters to pursue "socialist solutions" to Argentina's social justice, a pivotal point of his earlier *justicialismo*.<sup>32</sup> All of these factors led to the radicalization of the Peronist movement, and the evolution of guerrilla groups.

Frustrated by years of political repression, radical youth segments of the Peronists united to form various armed forces. "Those who founded and joined the Montoneros were convinced that armed struggle was the only effective means open to them – a question of 'responding with armed struggle to the armed struggle which [the Argentine military] was waging from the State'."<sup>33</sup> In 1970

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<sup>32</sup> Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*, pp. 29-40.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 75, Gillespie's quote source in "La unidad de FAR y Montoneros," *El Descamisado*, no. 22 (16 October 1973), pp. 6-7.

the Montoneros – a small band of no more than twelve individuals – kidnapped and assassinated former President Pedro Aramburu, an extremely important political figure. But the magnitude of their actions belied their insignificant numbers. After making their “debut” on the national political scene, they began recruiting, especially among lower-middle-class youth and industrial workers, but they mostly enlisted youth and not workers. Workers were less interested in armed resistance and preferred to participate in more traditional labor struggles, such as demonstrations and strikes. As the Montoneros’ numbers grew, so did their terrorist attacks and robberies. Joined by smaller groups of guerrillas – for example the *Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas* (FAP) and *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR), among others – the Montoneros became the largest guerrilla group operating in Argentina. I elaborate on the Montoneros’ role in the Peronist movement later.

The FAR was a Marxist-Peronist group that Communist Party dissidents had organized as early as 1967, and later developed into a Peronist guerrilla group in 1970. This group made several attacks on military installations, convoys, and personnel, robbed banks, and kidnapped and ransomed an executive of the Coca Cola Company (the ransom money would later be used to finance and support the 1973 Peronist presidential candidate). In October 1973 the FAR joined forces with the Montoneros. The FAP, *Descamisados*, and Montoneros were all



originally Peronist organizations. They attempted to merge to form the *Organizaciones Armadas Peronistas* (OAP, Peronist Armed Organizations), but their divergent ideologies and tactics prevented the organization from coalescing. The FAP, for instance, began as a coalition between a militant rightist group (the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario Tacuara*, Nationalist Revolutionary Tacuara Movement) and leftist groups that were inspired by the Cuban Revolution, and believed that "the masses, having experimented with military cooperation, with electoral participation, with large organized strikes, and grand mobilizations, had concretely changed nothing...only through their coordination and a large-scale war could the final triumph of obtaining power be achieved" (translation mine).<sup>34</sup> Because the FAP was initially created by such a fundamentally divergent group of people whose ideologies were essentially polarized, the group eventually fell apart. Members of the FAP split into various subgroups; some joined with the Montoneros; some organized a revolutionary rank-and-file worker organization called the *Peronismo de Base* (PB, Base Peronists), which focused on factory level issues; and yet others created the *FAP Nacional* (National Peronists Armed Forces) which opposed the elections of 1973. The *Descamisados* originated from the *Juventud Democratica Cristiana* (Christian Democratic Youth) and *Jóvenes del Nacionalismo Católico* (Nationalist Catholic Youth) in Buenos Aires as part of a radical youth sector of

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<sup>34</sup> Alejandro García, *La crisis Argentina: 1966-1976. Notas y documentos sobre una época de*

the labor movement. These groups were strongly influenced by Liberation Theory that more activist members of the Catholic Church espoused.<sup>35</sup> Their many terrorist activities included kidnapping the General Electric-ITT general manager for whom they received a ransom in the amount of one million dollars. The *Descamisados* and the Montoneros finally united in 1972.

Whereas the Montoneros grew in size and power, the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) mainly grew in power; it became the most militarily active urban guerrilla group. The ERP was born as an armed wing of the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (PRT), a Marxist-Leninist anti-imperialist political party, in 1970.<sup>36</sup> Their specialty was the abduction of multinational corporate executives for whom they would demand ransoms and use the money to buy food and clothing for poor neighborhoods in Córdoba.<sup>37</sup> A Trotskyist-Guevaraist organization, the ERP wanted a socialist revolution that would overthrow the military and replace it with a Cuba-style government; this group was clearly not a Peronist organization.

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*violencia política* (Murcia, 1994), pp. 190-191.

<sup>35</sup> The Second Vatican Council condemned poverty, injustice and exploitation, and linked these problems to man's greed for money and power. Clearly the Catholic reformers that constituted this council, and the writings they generated, viewed the role of the Church as one that advocated the liberation of the poor. The impact of these writings, especially Gustavo Gutiérrez', on Latin America was profound. Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, *Modern Latin America* (Oxford, 2001), p. 203.

<sup>36</sup> Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> David Rock, "Political Movements in Argentina: A Sketch from Past and Present," in *From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina*, eds. Monica Peralta-Ramos and Carlos H. Waisman (Boulder, 1987), p. 9.

The Montoneros' relationship with Perón was confused. During his time in exile, Perón encouraged and praised the Montoneros' actions against the government, thus earning their "Soldiers of Perón" title. Along with the *Juventud Peronista* (JP) – primarily an amalgam of young Peronist mass movement leaders – the Montoneros concentrated their efforts on making trouble for the military government in order to get their old leader back into the presidential office. Their efforts were successful and in 1973 Perón was once again at the helm of the Argentine government. Ironically, once in office he attacked the Montoneros and the JP by calling them "terrorist and subversive Marxist groups that infiltrated the [Peronist] Movement"<sup>38</sup> and accused them of being involved in the assassination of the CGT General Secretary. The cleavage between the Peronist Left and Perón became evident to the Montoneros and the JP; Perón had used them for his own gain, but when he gained power he abandoned them. Perón's death in July 1974 escalated dissent among the Peronistas. On September 6, 1974, the Montoneros held a secret press conference in which they declared a return to *la Resistencia* by carrying out a popular war against the government and business monopolies that repressed the labor movement.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile the ERP, which had not laid down its arms after Perón's

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<sup>38</sup> Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*, p. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

return, continued its revolution for socialism. After several splits and mergers, the two predominant guerrilla groups that remained were the ERP and the Montoneros. These two organizations, one Marxist and one Peronist respectively, changed tactics from terrorist attacks on mostly property to kidnappings and assassinations, specifically targeting policemen, military officers, multinational corporation executives, and union leaders.<sup>40</sup> To add to the mounting violence, government-supported paramilitary groups like the AAA engaged in open urban warfare by carrying out similar acts of violence against the left. Legitimizing their armed struggle as self-defense against right-wing violence only escalated the fighting. According to a September 17, 1974 article in the Buenos Aires daily newspaper, *La Opinión*, there was a political assassination every nineteen hours.<sup>41</sup> The Argentine nation was in a state of chaos.

#### NATIONAL SECURITY DOCTRINE AND THE "DIRTY WAR"

During the 1960s many Latin American militaries began interpreting national security in terms of national interests and economic development. Argentina's own national security ideals grew from other nations, specifically the U.S. and France. On the international scene, the United States and the Soviet Union were in the midst of the Cold War and each vied for ideological influence in foreign nations. The success of Fidel Castro's social revolution in Cuba in

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<sup>40</sup> Moyano, *Argentina's Lost Patrol*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

1959 caused the United States to formulate foreign policies toward Latin America that used "its economic power and democratic principles to challenge communism."<sup>42</sup> French military missions to Argentina that began in the 1950s often linked national security to a state's ability to conquer insurgency movements. Drawing on their own experience in Algeria, French military advisers often wrote articles about the dangers of an uncontrolled insurgent force and counterrevolutionary warfare in Argentine military journals.<sup>43</sup> Young military officers exposed to this ideology, either through personal contact by way of military exchange programs or through military literature in their periodicals, eventually became leaders in the 1970s. In essence, both French and U.S. doctrines were based on placing the world into a bipolar ideology spectrum: us against them, West against East, Christians against non-Christians, democracy against communism. Defeating terrorist organizations that opposed the "Western and Christian" world and threatened the national security of a state was a quintessential part of National Security Doctrine.

The communist threat in Argentina was not strong. Their most significant contribution to the political scene was in the early part of the 1900s when they managed to organize labor into unions that advocated their rights, but Perón

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<sup>42</sup> Michael J. Kryzanek, *U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Westport, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, p. 56.

undermined them and usurped the labor movement from their grasp. David Pion-Berlin asserts that, "Few Argentines at the time had any sympathies with Communist parties or movements. The most progressive party with any clout was, of course, the labor-based Peronist Party."<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the emergence of guerrilla movements in the 1960s and their expansion in the 1970s validated the Argentine military's National Security Doctrine. "From [the military's] point of view, the activities of these small bands of armed rebels represented a pernicious manifestation of a movement of global proportions"<sup>45</sup>; though not communists, the rebels were clearly revolutionary terrorists threatening the state.

Despite the military's initial reluctance to intervene in the Isabel Perón government – it wanted to teach the people a "lesson" about the military's importance to national stability and open the way for the reorganization of society as an alternative to the populist society Perón had created<sup>46</sup> – it finally acquiesced to civilian demands on March 24, 1976. The military had worked on its political plan for months prior to the coup in March, indicating that the military had shown a willingness to get involved prior to its actual intervention. The *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process for National Reorganization) – the name the

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<sup>44</sup> Pion-Berlin, *The Ideology of State Terror*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Marcelo Cavarozzi, "Political Cycles in Argentina since 1955," in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Latin America*, eds. Guillermo O'Donnell, Phillippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 42-43.

junta gave to its government – amended the constitution to give the military junta “legitimate” power over the state. Once the junta appointed him as president, General Videla undertook the war against subversion, stressing that the fight was not only for Argentina, but also for “Western, Christian civilization.”<sup>47</sup>

With the support of many civilian elites, the military resorted to open violence and complete disregard for human rights.<sup>48</sup> The boundaries of legality that the military had followed in combating guerrillas prior to its assumption of power disappeared. As Table 1 shows, prior to 1975 most deaths associated with the counterinsurgency war were attributed to the guerrillas. But 1976 and 1977 saw dramatic increases in deaths attributed to the military. Not unexpectedly, these were the years in which the military regime launched its full-scale assault against not only armed combatants, but also any subversives that opposed the state. To accomplish its edict, the government increased its support and interaction with paramilitary and police organizations. Although the direct level of military involvement in the illegal aspects of the war is still debated, all critics agree that there was some level of involvement.<sup>49</sup> These organizations were decentralized, and operated with independence and impunity, often able to target

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<sup>47</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York, 1998), p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 68.

<sup>49</sup> See Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, p. 60, and Pion-Berlin, *The Ideology of State Terror*, pp. 101-104.

individuals they deemed as subversives. Since subversion could be construed as any activity by an individual that questioned, threatened, or acted against national security, the countersubversive war affected every sector of Argentine society. Gary Wynia explains, "Most people pretended not to notice what [Videla] was doing, going about their lives assuming that it would all be over quickly. But many others, most of whom had never committed acts of terrorism, lived in fear, worried that they too might be taken away from their homes in one of the government's infamous, unmarked, gray Ford Falcons, never to be seen again."<sup>50</sup> Censorship by the government against the media, universities, and other institutions of learning reached a level the country had not witnessed before. "In addition to members of guerrilla organizations which were effectively decimated, lower and intermediate union cadres, students, civilian politicians, and professional groups (lawyers, psychiatrists, artists, social scientists, etc.), as well as relatives of initial victims" were disappeared.<sup>51</sup> Due process was not afforded to those suspected of being associated with, sympathetic to, or part of the guerrilla groups. With few exceptions, most individuals who were abducted by the military government or its agents were detained, tortured, executed, and dumped into mass graves or into the ocean; estimates of the total disappeared or killed are

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<sup>50</sup> Gary W. Wynia, *Argentina: Illusions and Realities* (New York, 1992), p.101.

<sup>51</sup> Juan E. Corradi, "Military Government and State Terrorism in Argentina," in *The Politics of Antipolitics: The Military in Latin America*, eds. Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies, Jr. (Wilmington, 1997), pp. 231-232.



as high as 30,000. "Although many individuals were caught up in the government's web of assault, the junta placed special emphasis on its war against

Table 1  
Casualties of the Argentine "Dirty War," 1969-1983

Year	Deaths Caused by Guerrillas	"Disappeared" and Military Presumed Responsible	Civilian Deaths in Confrontations
1969	1	---	---
1970	4	---	---
1971	24	6	---
1972	26	5	---
1973	49	18	---
1974	120	46	---
1975	179	359	564
1976	293	4,105	1,277
1977	70	3,098	555
1978	18	969	63
1979	7	181	3
1980	---	83	---
1981	---	19	---
1982	---	12	---
1983	---	9	---
Total	790	8,910	2,462

Extract from Debra Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina: Between Coups and Consolidation* (Lincoln, 1996), p. 59. Source: Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, 1982: p. 32.

the *trade union sector*" (italics and bolding mine).<sup>52</sup> Thus the military singled out the Peronists, for whom they held so much contempt, and whom they blamed for many of Argentina's social ills. As David Pion-Berlin states,

In sum, the junta's campaign of terror was extensive, hierarchically organized, and decentralized. As vast a network as it was, it did not operate indiscriminately. There were certain focal points of terror, chief among them the organized labor sector. According to secret orders signed by army commander General Roberto Viola, top priority was to be given to the manufacturing establishments. This was a form of economically motivated combat, targeted

<sup>52</sup> Pion-Berlin, *The Ideology of State Terror*, p. 98.

against trade unionists who were perceived to be obstructing the achievement of economic objectives.<sup>53</sup>

By 1978, the government declared that it was victorious in its campaign against subversion; they had successfully suppressed their primary opposition: the Peronists. When the Videla administration ended in March 1981, the military finally achieved the political stability it had longed for, but the suffering and injustice that the citizenry had to endure to achieve it had indeed been high prices to pay.<sup>54</sup>

#### **CONCLUSION: FROM A STATE OF CHAOS TO ONE OF TERROR**

Despite the original support the military had from the Argentinean citizenry, after two years of intense and seemingly indiscriminate violence, the junta's "Dirty War" had forged a separation between itself and the people. The military's primary opposition came from several guerrilla and militant groups – principally among them the Montoneros and the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) – that had evolved from, or been influenced by, the popular Peronist movement. Prior to the military assuming control of the government in 1976, labor unrest and political violence permeated Argentine society. Both the left and the right engaged in open urban warfare. According to David Rock, "in the latter half of 1974 the Triple A [a rightist paramilitary group] murdered some seventy

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

of its opponents, mostly predominantly leftist intellectuals or lawyers; by early 1975 they dispensed with leftists at the rate of fifty a week."<sup>55</sup> On the left, the 1970 Montoneros' assassination of retired army General Aramburu, who was also a former president, signaled the direct targeting of the military by the largest of the guerrilla groups. Guerrillas attacked and murdered military officers and police personnel; as Table 1 indicates, prior to 1975, guerrillas caused more deaths than did the military. The *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP) often targeted multinational executives for ransom money. Argentina was in a true state of emergency. Upon assuming the presidency, General Videla launched a countersubversive war against not only guerrillas, but also anyone suspected of subversion. Initially, "the military enjoyed a relatively high level of popular support for its so-called National Reorganization (or *Proceso*), especially from the middle-class which welcomed efforts to end labor unrest and political violence."<sup>56</sup> Certainly not all Peronists were involved in the guerrilla movements. However, I contend that starting with *la Resistencia* and through the mid 1970s, society, along with the military, came to the conclusion that there was no difference between the labor movement, Peronism, guerrilla warfare, and radical violence. In other words, over time the political violence that escalated amongst the government, their opposition, the elites, the Peronists, the anti-Peronists, the right

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<sup>55</sup> David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987: From Spanish Colonialization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 363.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon, "Withdrawal in Disgrace: Decline of the Argentine Military, 1976-1983," p. 208.

and the left was all the same in the eyes of society, and it all appeared to be linked to Peronism. As Daniel James recalls, "In the course of researching this book [*Resistance and Integration*] I was constantly struck by the seemingly unquestioning identification, particularly amongst militants, of working-class activism, resistance and organization with being a Perónist."<sup>57</sup> Initially targeting the Peronists as their primary opponents, the military's war expanded to include any act of subversiveness, which of course anything could be deemed "subversive." This practice of abducting, torturing, and murdering individuals "assumed" to be subversives created a state of terror amid the citizenry. Needless to say, ultimately the public's repugnance of the military's "Dirty War" atrocities – along with its failed economic policies and its loss of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War – caused the military to fall from power.

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<sup>57</sup> James, *Resistance and Integration*, p. 264.

## Chapter 4: The Economy

### DEPENDENCY THEORY AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Like many other Latin American countries, Argentina's economy has depended greatly on exports. From its colonial experience, Argentina was used to seeing European empires export its raw materials to Europe. By the late nineteenth century, Argentina's "vast and fertile pampas became a major producer of agricultural and pastoral goods – particularly wool, wheat, and, most notably, beef."<sup>58</sup> Since power was in the hands of an oligarchy of landowners who were in association with British capitalists, these raw materials meant profitable earnings that kept them in power. This mutually beneficial arrangement between foreign capital and the country's elite perpetuated a dependency upon exports and investments from abroad and can be traced throughout Argentina's economic history.

The industrialization era of the early twentieth century brought economic development to the country, spurring migration from the countryside and immigration from Southern Europe to Argentina's large cities, especially Buenos Aires and Córdoba. Since Argentina was integrated into the international division of labor it was subject to the ups and downs of the world market. As such,

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<sup>58</sup> Skidmore and Smith, *Modern Latin America*, p. 44.

Argentina's economy suffered in the 1930s from the world economic depression. The following explanation of this development trend and dependency theory by Jonathan Brown applies to Argentina:

The half century spanning from 1930 to the late 1970s... [was] critical economically, politically, and socially. The Great Depression shocked Latin America's previous economic reliance on exporting raw materials and importing manufactured goods from the United States and northern Europe. Thereafter, most Latin American countries followed similar development plans. They tended to reject certain free-market doctrines (though not necessarily capitalism itself), to increase state regulation of the economy, to stimulate domestic industrialization as a substitute for the import of industrial products, to display economic nationalism, and to nationalize the basic industries... The economic and social changes that occurred between 1930 and the late 1970s made possible significant political transformations as well.<sup>59</sup>

Certainly the country's economy suffered with international market fluctuations, but more specifically, the working classes shouldered the brunt of economic crises. The period Brown discusses coincides with Juan Perón's rise to power. Not surprisingly, labor movements gained momentum when the economy was on an upswing, and suffered governmental repression when it was on a downswing. For example, during World War II, demand for Argentine raw materials again brought the economy to an upswing. Argentina enjoyed a trade surplus of \$439 million in 1945, and \$580 million in 1946.<sup>60</sup> The Perón government met labor

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan C. Brown, ed., *Workers' Control in Latin America, 1930-1979* (Chapel Hill, 1997), pp. 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> Pion-Berlin, *The Ideology of State Terror*, p. 66.

demands by using the surplus to increase spending: it paid off its foreign debt, increased social programs, bought back foreign owned companies, and most importantly, increased real wages by 35 percent. As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, Perón gave the labor movement its first real political power and changed the balance of power in Argentina when he served as Labor Secretary and then as president.

By the time the 1950s came around, Perón's government had to cut spending because its economy began to recede. The reaction from labor was, understandably, mass protestation. The military reacted to the country's civil unrest and economic ills by intervening in 1955. Foreign investments, along with austerity measures, helped recover the economy in the 1960s: gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates rose from 2.6 percent in 1967 to 8.5 percent in 1969, and inflation declined from 31.9 to 7.5 in those same years, respectively. When Perón returned to power in 1973 (the military had effectively controlled the economy but not the civil unrest, the masses had continually demanded the return of Perón) he brokered a pact between labor and the private sector – the *Pacto Social* – that resulted in a \$703 million surplus. However, the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 caused international oil prices to soar in 1974 and the Argentine economy began to fall once again, since it depended upon imported oil.<sup>61</sup> The oil crisis

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, pp. 71-85.

indeed exacerbated economic turmoil, inflation reached up to 3,000 percent at times. Labor reacted violently and social unrest increased dramatically. When the military forced Isabel Perón to leave office in 1976, hyperinflation was at 450 percent, anarchy seemed epidemic, and intervention was practically inevitable.

### **THE MILITARY'S NEW POLITICAL ECONOMY**

The military's solution to Argentina's economic ills was orthodox liberal free trade doctrine. The junta appointed José Martínez de Hoz as the Economic Minister; he built his economic team with like-minded ideologues who believed in free market economics. Among them was Alberto Diz, a doctoral graduate from the University of Chicago, who was well known and respected for his monetary theory. Together they set out to stabilize the economy, regardless of the political or social costs. Martínez de Hoz blamed Argentina's previous thirty years of economic problems on excessive interventions by the state "which unduly burdened the country with the social cost of such an action, and at the same time suppressed the possibility of an agile and efficient development of private enterprise to promote the growth of the economy."<sup>62</sup>

The austerity measures that Martínez de Hoz implemented aimed to reduce inflation, stimulate economic growth, generate trade revenue, and

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<sup>62</sup> Pion-Berlin, *The Ideology of State Terror*, p. 104.



eliminate the public deficit.<sup>63</sup> The national deficit, Martínez de Hoz contended, was the primary cause of hyperinflation. The year prior to becoming the minister of the economy, the deficit equaled 15.2 percent of GDP: "The excess of public spending over income was bothersome, but even more so was the fact that most of this money had been squandered on consumer subsidies, wasteful and poorly conceived public works, overstaffed administrative offices, and, most importantly, inefficient state-run enterprises," argues Pion-Berlin.<sup>64</sup> Public companies best exemplified the troubles of a state interventionist economy. The government routinely over-regulated industries, protected markets, tolerated inefficiencies, and allowed exorbitant wages. To stimulate growth, the military abandoned the country's Import Substitution and Industrialization (ISI) program and liberalized its markets, as Martínez de Hoz recommended. The regime increasingly opened its economy to international competition by reducing import tariffs, freezing wages, and liberalizing interest rates. From the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) perspective, Argentina's actions were exactly what the country needed to stabilize its economy. Not surprisingly, the IMF approved a \$290 million loan, in essence bestowing Argentina with credit-worthiness, and soon other international financial institutions began investing in the country. Between 1976 and 1980, the country's financial sector witnessed a 45 percent increase in loans. Money

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

flowed into the country, but despite having a positive impact on some productive sectors, it also caused risky speculation, corruption, inflation, and an increase in foreign participation, something Argentines did not like. Although some benefits resulted from the austerity measures – inflation dropped to 50 percent, export trade revenues increased by 33 percent, imports fell by 20 percent, unemployment steadily decreased, and the \$1 billion deficit from the previous year became a \$650 million surplus<sup>65</sup> – most critics believed foreign capital and the elite received the greatest benefits, while increasing the disparities between the rich and the poor.<sup>66</sup>

Other sectors of the Argentinean economy also ebbed and flowed markedly during Martínez de Hoz's tenure in the Videla administration. For example, in 1979 agriculture expanded by 4.1 percent, mining grew by 6.4 percent, manufacturing went up by 10.2 percent, and construction showed an increase of 2.7 percent. From a macroeconomic perspective, these were all positive indicators. However, just a year later, agriculture declined by 6.5 percent and manufacturing declined by 3.8 percent; although construction and mining expanded, it was not enough to prevent a recession and an overall 6.2 percent decrease in GDP. Revenues could not keep up with the 36.7 percent cumulative

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<sup>65</sup> Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, p. 66.

<sup>66</sup> Gordon, "Withdrawal in Disgrace: Decline of the Argentine Military, 1976-1983," p. 210.

annual growth in foreign debt. Monica Peralta-Ramos explains how state companies attracted foreign capital in order to equilibrate the government's exchange policy and the balance of payments:

From 1978 until the beginning of 1981 these companies were encouraged to contract foreign debt even when the social pressure to obtain a devaluation became stronger and stronger, and the overvaluation of the peso became more and more evident. As a result of this management of state companies, their foreign indebtedness grew from 3.1 billion dollars at the end of 1977 to 9.2 billion in March of 1981.<sup>67</sup>

Michael Monteón further points out that Martínez de Hoz swayed back and forth between true free-market economics and strong state interventions; thus he rewarded exporters, protected industrialists, and repressed labor.<sup>68</sup> Not wanting to create massive unemployment, he gradually controlled inflation, but it was worker's wages that lost purchasing power; again the working class suffered the most from the government's failed economic policies. According to a survey by the *Latin America Regional Report: Southern Cone*, poverty rose from 7 to 28 percent from 1970 to 1980.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Monica Peralta-Ramos, "Toward an Analysis of the Structural Basis of Coercion in Argentina: The Behavior of the Major Fractions of the Bourgeoisie, 1976-1983," in *From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina*, eds. Monica Peralta-Ramos and Carlos H. Waisman (Boulder, 1987), p. 54.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Monteón, "Can Argentina's Democracy Survive Economic Disaster?" in *From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina*, eds. Monica Peralta-Ramos and Carlos H. Waisman (Boulder, 1987), p. 25.

<sup>69</sup> *Latin America Regional Report: Southern Cone*, 1 February 1985.

When General Roberto Viola succeeded General Videla in March 1981, the economy was in serious trouble. The Viola administration, with its new minister of economy, Lorenzo Sigaut, oriented its economic policy toward reducing the external imbalance of payments. But capital flight ensued when the "changing of the guard" took place. To avoid further outflow of currency, Sigaut devalued the Argentine peso by 10 percent; the outcome was unexpected. Instead of curtailing the outflow, capital flight quickened. The neophyte administration resorted to emergency borrowing. "The short lived administration of General Roberto Viola (March to December 1981) attempted to reverse the growing imbalance of payments crisis by implementing successive devaluations of the peso to raise the price of competing imports, discourage speculation against the peso, and help restore industrial activity."<sup>70</sup> But their efforts were to no avail; when inflation reached 400 percent, the junta removed Viola from office.

The military junta appointed General Leopoldo Galtieri to the presidency, and he in turn appointed a new minister of economy, Roberto T. Alemann. The new minister established a single rate of foreign exchange and allowed the peso to float. Again, austerity measures seemed the only answer to the spiraling economy; spending was reduced, public wages, pensions and subsidies were frozen, and personal income tax was restricted. Because of the Malvinas/Falkland

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<sup>70</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 130.

Islands War in April 1982, the economic plans changed drastically: "Alemann devalued the peso by 17 percent, placed an emergency tax on exports, increased fuel prices, raised taxes on cigarettes and alcohol, implemented exchange controls, and restricted imports."<sup>71</sup> Capital flight intensified because of the war, and when the Argentine military forces lost the war against Britain, Galtieri resigned and retired General Reynaldo B. Bignone assumed the presidency.

#### **CONCLUSION: ECONOMIC POLICY FAILURES**

Years of free market theory implementation had failed to yield the results the military regime needed to legitimize itself. The international loans that seemed like a welcomed stimulus in 1976 became a burden too heavy to bear by 1980; Argentina's external debt grew from \$9.9 billion at the beginning of the military regime, to \$49.9 billion in 1983, as shown in Table 2. The GDP showed some signs of growth over the ten-year period, but it paled in comparison to the country's external debt. Argentina's IMF account balance went from a positive \$651 million in 1976, to a negative balance of \$2.4 billion in 1983, and reached a high of negative \$4.8 billion in 1980. Unemployment, in the aggregate, stayed within a 2.6 percentage difference in the ten-year period shown, but wages actually lost 50 percent of their value in 1982 as compared to a few years prior.<sup>72</sup> The international recession of the 1980s would eventually lead economists to

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>72</sup> Monteón, "Can Argentina's Democracy Survive Economic Disaster?," p. 27.

label that decade as the "Lost Decade" in Latin America. Shrinking internal markets and deindustrialization led firms to default on their loan payments and ultimately caused the collapse of the financial firms that had overextended themselves by making unsecured and speculative loans.<sup>73</sup> Many military officers had taken advantage of the ludicrous availability of low-interest foreign loans for financial speculation. Adding insult to injury, Norden explains, military officers who held public administration duties collected double salaries, their military pay and their public position pay. Also reported were incidents of extortion and looting by some of those soldiers involved in the countersubversive war: the military had undeniably lost its integrity.<sup>74</sup> From 1975 to 1980, employment in industry fell by 26 percent and production dropped by 17 percent between 1975 and 1981. To further aggravate the financial situation, Martínez de Hoz announced a series of economic measures just before leaving office as the Economic Minister in 1981; among the measures was a 23 percent devaluation of the currency, that came on top of a previous 87 percent devaluation that had taken place between 1978 and 1980. One U.S. dollar could buy 10,000 Argentine pesos, as compared to three years earlier when one dollar could buy 2,000 pesos. This final devaluation dealt a painful blow to the military regime's credibility. The administrations of Viola, Galtieri, and Bignone were no better.

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<sup>73</sup> Gordon, "Withdrawal in Disgrace: Decline of the Argentine Military, 1976-1983," p. 210.

<sup>74</sup> Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, p. 65.

Table 2  
The Argentine Economy, 1973-1983

Year	Gross Domestic Product (million dollars)	External Debt (million dollars)	IMF Account Balance (million dollars)	Unemployment (percentage)
1973	72,015	6,429	711	5.6
1974	73,094	6,789	118	3.4
1975	75,705	8,171	-1,287	2.3
1976	75,517	9,880	651	4.5
1977	80,476	11,445	1,126	2.8
1978	77,793	13,276	1,856	2.8
1979	82,295	20,950	-513	2.0
1980	84,989	27,157	-4,774	2.3
1981	79,805	35,657	-4,712	4.5
1982	74,516	43,634	-2,353	4.8
1983	76,475	45,920	-2,436	4.2

Extract from Debra Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina: Between Coups and Consolidation* (Lincoln, 1996), p. 67. Sources: GDP from Wilkie and Contreras (1992): p. 1368; Unemployment from Wilkie and Contreras (1992): p. 378; IMF Account Balance from *IMF, International Financial Statistics Yearbook* (1994): pp. 190-191.

Constant devaluations in attempts to curtail capital flight only exacerbated the situation. Two more ministers of economy, José María Dagnino Pastore and Jorge Wehbe, also failed in their attempts to stabilize the economy. In 1982 the GDP declined by 5.2 percent: agriculture expanded 5.5 percent, construction declined 20.1 percent, manufacturing declined 4.5 percent, mining declined 0.9 percent, and inflation grew to 434 percent. As Waisman puts it, "The policies of [the] regime were a reflection of its incoherence: trade liberalization and unrestrained spending, an explosive mix in a society with a non-competitive manufacturing sector and a highly organized and mobilized working class."<sup>75</sup> The

<sup>75</sup> Carlos H. Waisman, "The Legitimation of Democracy Under Adverse Conditions: The Case of Argentina," in *From Military Rule to Liberal Democracy in Argentina*, eds. Monica Peralta-Ramos and Carlos H. Waisman (Boulder, 1987), p. 97.

few supporters the military regime had were gone. The economic turmoil, compounded by losing the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War (discussed in the next chapter) and the horrific repressions of the "Dirty War," all affected the military regime's decision to tolerate its opposition and return power to civilian authorities. The welcome that Argentine society had extended to the "men on horseback" in 1976 had worn thin indeed by the time Bignone set democratic elections for October 10, 1983.



## **Chapter 5: The Malvinas/Falkland Islands War**

### **CONFLICT OVER OWNERSHIP**

By 1981, the politically embattled military regime in Argentina was rapidly losing legitimacy amongst its citizenry. Its failed economic policies along with the brutal repression of its opponents perpetuated the public's discontent. What the military regime needed, it believed, was a nationalistic rallying that would enhance the military's image and support. The Malvinas Islands, whose sovereignty the Argentines and Britons long disputed, appeared to be the answer to the problem. The Argentineans claimed the islands were theirs, as did the British, but who was right? A brief review of the islands' history is necessary to understand the "official" reasoning behind General Galtieri's decision to engage in the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War.

The Treaty of Tordesillas split the world into two halves. Claiming itself as the only legitimate power ordained by God in European Christian nations, the Vatican issued this treaty to give one half of the world to the Portuguese Crown, and the other half to the Spanish Crown in 1494. The Malvinas Islands were in the half belonging to Spain. Over a period of several hundred years, both Britain and Spain sent explorers to the region, and each time a new explorer "rediscovered" the islands, he would subsequently rename them. Among the

more well known explorers of the region were Ferdinand Magellan from Spain and Sir Frances Drake from England. In 1690, a British captain named the sound off the coast of the islands after Anthony, Viscount Falkland, and the name, as well as the British claim to the Falkland Islands, stuck.<sup>76</sup> In 1722, a Paris map labeled the "islands *Isles Malouines* which in due course became the Spanish *Malvinas*, and ultimately the name the Argentines insist upon."<sup>77</sup>

The three great European powers of the sixteenth century – Britain, Spain, and France – explored, discovered, and colonized the world, according to each, in the name of God and country, and naturally conflict arose among them. The French were the first to "officially" colonize the islands in 1764, but the Spaniards purchased the settlement from France rather than engage in a battle for what they believed to be their rightful and sovereign territory according to the Treaty of Tordesillas. At the same time, the British established a smaller settlement on the western side of the islands. The Spanish Governor in Buenos Aires, known at that time as the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata, expelled the British settlers in the west by force after several years of quarrelling between British and Spanish (of either Argentine descent or from Rio de la Plata viceroyalty origin) settlers in the east. To avoid armed conflict with Britain, Spain handed over the islands to the

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<sup>76</sup> Fritz L. Hoffmann and Olga Mingo Hoffmann, *Sovereignty in Dispute: The Falklands/Malvinas, 1493-1982* (Boulder, 1984), pp. 17-29.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Dobson, John Miller, and Ronald Payne, *The Falklands Conflict* (Great Britain, 1982), p. 15.

United Kingdom in 1771.<sup>78</sup> The British later abandoned the islands in 1774 and immediately the Spaniards occupied and administered the islands from then until 1810.

Argentina gained independence from Spain in 1810, and Britain's recognition of Argentina as a nation-state in 1825 signaled their acceptance of Argentina's sovereignty over the islands, or at least until 1833. It was in that year that Britain ejected the Argentines from the Malvinas because it wanted to establish political rights over the islands and conveniently over suspected mineral resources in the area. Thus in that year the Britons incorporated the territory as part of the British Empire.<sup>79</sup> Establishing a British Governor in 1834, the islands have remained under British administration until the present day.

Prior to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War, Argentina had appealed to the international community for its rightful sovereignty over the islands. The United Nations (UN), upon Argentina's protest against colonialism in 1960, passed a resolution to end colonialism in the world and asked countries to list their colonies; the British naturally listed the Falkland Islands. Argentina objected, so in 1965 the UN ratified Resolution 2065 which urged the two countries to begin

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, pp. 13-16.

<sup>79</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 72.

discussions that would lead to a peaceful settlement over the Malvinas. On September 28, 1966, while negotiations were ongoing between Argentina and Britain, a small group of heavily armed Argentine "commandos" high-jacked a plane, demanded it land on the Malvinas Islands, released the passengers, and kept the crew and some British islanders who had gone to see what was happening as hostages. The high-jackers, who were frustrated with the slowness of the diplomatic process, demanded that England return the islands to Argentina. The "commandos" surrendered a day later, but their action, which they called Operation Condor, caused several anti-British demonstrations throughout Argentina. Eventually the Argentine government apologized for the incident and returned to the bargaining table. Negotiations continued for several years without reaching an agreement other than signing a declaration stating that neither country renounced its claim to sovereignty over the islands in 1971.

Negotiations appeared amiable between the two nations until questions regarding the exploitation of the island's natural resources – oil in particular – gained prominence. The negotiations quickly turned sour as Argentine diplomats pressed the British for resolution, specifically demanding that the islands be returned to Argentina. The British clung to their claim that the islanders did not want to become part of Argentina, and as such, it was their duty to protect the interests of their citizens. They claimed it was an issue of self-determination on

the part of the British islanders. To further aggravate the situation, Britain decided to send an exploratory mission, the Shackleton Mission, to the islands without Argentine consent. According to Argentina, the mission violated UN Resolutions 2065 and 3160, which emphasized that the two countries needed to jointly reach agreements over the Malvinas Islands; Britain's unilateral decision to send the Shackleton Mission clearly violated the Resolutions, and the Organization of American States unanimously supported that claim. Negotiations seemed to continue endlessly to no avail. The triggering event was the Davidoff Affair. A businessman interested in salvaging metal from the South Georgia island, a dependency of the Malvinas, made several visits to the island without going through the "proper" channels to land. When his party again landed without clearing the docking with the British post, the British protested and demanded that workers have visas issued on their passports instead of the previous stamping of worker "white cards." This demand put the military in a bind; accepting the demand would in essence acquiesce to British sovereignty over the islands. Finally, after seventeen years of foot-dragging negotiations and the Davidoff Affair, the Argentines invaded the Malvinas Islands on April 2, 1982.

#### **AN ATTEMPT AT NATIONALISM AND FAILED WARFARE**

Given Argentina's frustrating negotiations with the United Kingdom over the Malvinas Islands, the military government had an issue upon which to rally

the nation. Operation Condor had indeed shown the country's nationalistic pride and the government hoped it could tap into that pride and patriotism in order to divert the country's attention from the chaotic economic situation.<sup>80</sup> Norden suggests that the military was also looking for a "clean" war to fight. Conflict over the Beagle Channel, a longstanding territorial dispute between Argentina and Chile, nearly escalated into warfare between the two nations in 1978. It was only the Pope's diplomatic intervention that led the soldiers to lay down their arms.<sup>81</sup> As the military had proven its importance to the people of Argentina when it "saved" the country from social chaos in 1976, so again it would prove its military might and importance by engaging in a war that would "save" Argentine sovereign territory.

The invasion received wide support from the populace. Argentines overwhelmingly believed that the Malvinas rightfully belonged to Argentina. Schoolbooks, maps, and history lessons throughout the country emphasized this very point. Thousands of young Argentine men rushed to enlist in the military in order to fight for the nation's honor.<sup>82</sup> Even the political opposition parties supported the military's stand against imperialistic Britain. Leaders of the

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<sup>80</sup> Monteón, "Can Argentina's Democracy Survive Economic Disaster?," p. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>82</sup> Harry Charles Thornsward, Jr., "Argentina: The Military in Power 1976-1982" (The University of Texas at Austin, 1983), p. 52.

*Partido Justialista* (Justicialist Party), *Partido Comunista Argentina* (Argentina Communist Party), *Partido Socialista Popular* (Popular Socialist Party), *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), and the *Partido Intransigente* (Intransigent Party) all praised the move by Galtieri, and many also attended the swearing in ceremony of the Malvinas Islands governor, General Marion Benjamín Menéndez.<sup>83</sup> But while the invasion gave the military regime a short-term boost in public support, the armed forces soon lost it.

Despite a nearly perfect operation on the first day of the war, the military had lost its war fighting capability. The invasion took just a few hours and resulted in the death of only one Argentine soldier; there were no British casualties. The overwhelming Argentine forces, numbering 11,000, quickly overtook the 81 Royal Marines stationed on the island. However, having spent the previous decade fighting a counterinsurgency war, and because of its repeated governmental interventions, the military had become politicized and behaved more like a bureaucracy rather than an armed force. Bureaucratic paper shuffling caused planning guidance and operational orders to take much too long to develop and implement. Officers on the front lines, who were conditioned to wait for guidance from higher echelons rather than take and exploit an initiative, a key component in war fighting, often failed to gain an operational advantage against

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<sup>83</sup> Argentina: A Country Study, p. 249.

British forces despite their potential to do so given their greater numbers in force. As such the Argentine forces were unable to carryout effective, sustained conventional warfare. Argentina's higher military command had incorrectly believed that they could simply occupy the Malvinas Islands without needing to sustain operations. Operational and logistical planners failed in their military assessment by assuming that Great Britain would not launch a counter-offensive to reclaim the islands, which of course the British did do. Britain began naval and air strikes on May 1, and within a week the British had sunk the Argentine ship *General Belgrano*; two days later the Argentines responded in kind by sinking the British ship *Sheffield*. Despite having some of the most advanced weapon systems – from 1980 to 1981 alone the regime had spent \$13 billion on war materiel and weapons – and being one of Latin America's premier militaries, Argentina could not compete with Great Britain's better trained, better equipped, and more professional armed forces.<sup>84</sup>

The Argentine leadership's coordination efforts between the army, navy and air force were inefficient. Rivalries among the services and their inability to plan as a joint task force resulted in poorly developed and inadequately implemented war plans. Additionally, military leaders sent their least experienced

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<sup>84</sup> Alejandro Dabat and Luis Lorenzano, *Argentina: The Malvinas and the End of Military Rule* (London, 1984), p. 93.



soldiers to the islands while leaving the more senior and seasoned troops behind; some soldiers had as little as two weeks of formal military training. However, the most egregious leadership failure was how many field commanders abandoned their front line troops in the midst of battle; indeed these high-ranking officers were nothing more than bureaucrats who wore military uniforms but obviously had no true military values or discipline.<sup>85</sup> Dabat and Lorenzano describe a particularly poignant episode with one of the regime's allegedly elite navy units:

The dictatorship had sent [to the Georgia Islands] an elite naval commando unit, known as the "Lagartos," which was composed of officers and [noncommissioned officers] supposedly steeled in the "internal war." At some time between 1976 and 1979, all of them had performed duties at the navy's notorious College of Mechanics, one of the main organizing centers of torture and "disappearances" through which at least four thousand political and social prisoners had passed. This cream of the navy was ordered to "resist until death"; and before its departure the commanding officer, Captain Alfredo Astiz, had boosted: "Officers die on their feet. We will give our last drop of blood in defense of the Georgias."\* Yet, on 25 April, after the purely token firing of a few shells at British ships, these men surrendered unconditionally. As Admiral Sanguinetti, ex-inspector of the French Navy, had explained a few days before: "Killing women, unarmed men and children, torture and rape, are not the same as killing Englishmen in combat."\*\* The officers of the Junta's army, even those most hardened by war, had received the major part of their training in torture chambers. Without the political, moral or professional capacity to sustain a just war, they proved to be lacking in any real combat discipline.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Frederick C. Turner, "The Aftermath of Defeat in Argentina," *Current History*, 82 (February 1983), p. 60.

<sup>86</sup> Dabat and Lorenzano, *Argentina: The Malvinas and the End of Military Rule*, pp. 99-100.

Their quotes, which I denoted with asterisks, are as follows: \**Excelsior*, 23 May 1982;

\*\**Excelsior*, 17 April 1982.

The air force performed perhaps best of the three services. Its Mirage fighters performed surprisingly well against the British Harriers; the Argentine air force caused substantial damage to sixty percent of Britain's fleet and caused it to withdrawal beyond the reach of their combat aircraft.<sup>87</sup> In the end Argentina lost more aircraft than did Britain, and even though the junta claimed "technological superiority" was to blame for losing the air campaign, the reality was that British pilots had had better training and carried out their duties more bravely and efficiently than did the Argentinean officers. The army performed the worst. The British ground counterinvasion war began on May 31. In spite of having a numerical disadvantage – 9,000 Argentine army troops against 3,000 British soldiers – the Britons outmaneuvered and outfought the Argentineans. Again, reports of officers abandoning their posts were embarrassingly accurate. Approximately three weeks after the ground war had begun, the last battle was fought on the outskirts of Port Stanley on June 11, and within hours, General Menéndez signed the act of surrender. At the conclusion of the war, 712 Argentines and 255 Britons had lost their lives. Within a week, on June 15, 1982, General Galtieri admitted defeat, and two days later resigned as president.

#### **MILITARY REGIME DISCREDITED**

Not only was the military regime unable to strategically plan and execute a

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

successful war, its international political strategy was also flawed. Galtieri erroneously "assumed that Britain would protest but do nothing, that the United States would remain neutral, and that the Soviet Union would veto any strong action in the United Nations Security Council."<sup>88</sup> He had underestimated Margaret Thatcher's willingness to engage in combat, despite Ronald Reagan's repeated warnings to Galtieri of her "iron lady" character. Indeed, Reagan had spoken to Galtieri at length on the phone just before the Argentine invasion and had emphasized that diplomatic relations between the United States and Argentina would be strained by military action because "the United States would have to support Britain because of political principles and military alliance."<sup>89</sup> Apparently Galtieri did not take Reagan at his word, so when the U.S. announced on April 30 that it supported the U.K. in defending its citizens against Argentine aggression, the head of the junta was taken by surprise. Also taking him by surprise was the United Nations' passing of Resolution 502, presented by Britain to the Security Council, which condemned Argentina's invasion. The Soviets did not veto the resolution as Galtieri expected; Argentina's anti-communist NSD rhetoric had sealed its fate with the USSR. When the European Economic Community (EEC) also supported Resolution 502 and the embargo against Argentina, the Galtieri government's political strategy had obviously failed. "The

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<sup>88</sup> Turner, "The Aftermath of Defeat in Argentina," p. 60.

<sup>89</sup> Hoffmann and Hoffmann, *Sovereignty in Dispute*, p. 163.

Argentine government did not seem to realize that it was isolated from the mainstream of international politics, without prestige and with a bad reputation for military coups and trampling on human rights,"<sup>90</sup> it simply did not have international support for its actions.

The international political wrangling had an adverse affect upon public opinion in Argentina, but the military junta's inability to do what a military is supposed to do – fight and win the nation's wars – dealt a final blow to the military's beleaguered legitimacy. There were several reports that commanders radioed guidance to front line troops from the rear of the battlefield in order to avert personal danger; these officers clearly showed cowardice and moral corruption that would be hard to justify to anyone, military or civilian.<sup>91</sup> Admiral Sanguinetti's explanation of the military's inability to kill Englishmen as opposed to killing its own citizens undoubtedly echoed the sentiment of the Argentine people. "We may conclude that despite the numerical strength and sophisticated weaponry of the army and air force, the Argentinean high command demonstrated a prodigious incompetence and lack of foresight in embarking upon a military adventure that was condemned from the start."<sup>92</sup> Involved in a morally corrupt counterinsurgency war, mired in the political morass of the nation, and unable to

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>91</sup> Dabat and Lorenzano, *Argentina: The Malvinas and the End of Military Rule*, p. 102.

<sup>92</sup> Rock, "Political Movements in Argentina," p. 95.

exercise their requisite military craft – war fighting – the military officers of the junta failed at government and became discredited.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

As delineated in the first chapter, this thesis aims to demonstrate that Robert Dahl's axioms apply to the Argentine military authoritarian regime that held power from 1976 to 1983. A brief synopsis of his axioms is in order. Basically, Dahl argues that a government in power will increasingly tolerate opposition as long as the cost of doing so is relatively low (Axiom 1), that it will be more tolerant of its opposition if the cost of suppressing that opposition increases relative to the suppression the government exercises (Axiom 2), and lastly, that the more it costs a government to suppress its opposition as compared to the cost it will incur if it tolerates that same opposition, the more competitive the government will be (Axiom 3). Competitiveness refers to the government's and its opposition's ability to challenge each other in terms of policy decision-making and implementation without engaging in violent actions against one another. Toleration refers to the allowance the government gives to a group that opposes it to exist and compete with it for power. In the Argentine case the military junta was the government, and as I have shown throughout this thesis, the Peronists were the group that principally opposed the military regime. Cost can be measured in a variety of ways: for this thesis, I have chosen to measure cost in

terms of the military's legitimacy and its worthiness to hold power.<sup>93</sup> In other words, the military was able to assume power in 1976 based on the populace's belief in the military's abilities to end social unrest, stabilize the economy, and reorganize Argentine society. So cost to the military would be measured in terms of its legitimacy before its citizens. Thus, at the beginning of the military regime's tenure, Argentine society was tolerant of the government's action to end civil unrest, it was tolerant of their "Dirty War" and therefore the cost of carrying out that counterinsurgency war was relatively low – the military's legitimacy was not immediately jeopardized. As Dennis Gordon argues, "The public.... welcomed the military's promise to eradicate political violence."<sup>94</sup>

The military had intervened in government previously. What was the difference between the times it intervened before and the time it intervened in 1976? The most fundamental difference was its level of suppression toward its opposition, principally the Peronist opposition. The regime could violently suppress the Peronists or anyone connected to them, or as the military would argue, anyone who was a subversive, because the cost to its legitimacy was relatively low. According to the military, between 1969 and 1979, subversives

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<sup>93</sup> As I discussed in Chapter One, this term of legitimacy is taken directly from Baynes' description of legitimacy as a concept that refers to a political order's worthiness to be recognized as a political power, Krieger, *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*.

<sup>94</sup> Gordon, "Withdrawal in Disgrace: Decline of the Argentine Military, 1976-1983," p. 209.

carried out 21,642 terrorist acts.<sup>95</sup> By linking the Peronists to the guerrilla movement and subsequently to any and all social unrest, the regime could specifically target and suppress them as their primary opposition. As I pointed out in Chapter Three, the Peronista movement became increasingly radical in its actions from its inception in 1946, through the evolution of class resistance movements in the 1950s, and its metamorphosis into guerrilla groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To re-emphasize, not all Peronists were subversive, nor were they all involved in guerrilla groups. However, the guerrilla movement, whether directly or indirectly, grew from the Peronist movement "through the radicalization of Peronist activists and the radicalization and original 'peronization' of youths."<sup>96</sup> As such, the military regime of 1976 was able to violently suppress the Peronists and attempt to annihilate them as compared with previous regimes that proscribed Peronism but could not destroy the movement. Each time the military intervened after the 1955 coup that ousted Juan Perón from office, it did so with the support of the elites. However, during the 1976 coup, support came from the landed and business elite, most of the working and middle-classes, the major newspapers, the Catholic Church, the Radical Civic Union (UCR), and even Peronist leaders who longed for economic stability and an end to terrorism.<sup>97</sup> So the difference was the linkage between Peronism and

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<sup>95</sup> Loveman and Davies, *The Politics of Antipolitics*, p. 164.

<sup>96</sup> Gillespie, *Soldiers of Perón*, p. 29.

<sup>97</sup> Argentina, A Country Study, p. 66.



subversiveness. This connection “justified” the counterinsurgency war in the minds of the “men on horseback” and to some extent in the minds of those that supported the coup d’état.

Dahl contends that a government’s cost of suppressing its opposition is inversely proportional to the level of toleration it has for its opponents. If the cost of suppressing its opponents is low, then the government – in the case of Argentina, the military regime – will be less tolerant of the opposition. What were the costs to the military that validated Dahl’s axiom and forced it to tolerate opposition? The greatest cost that the Argentinean military regime faced while in office from 1976 to 1983 was its loss of legitimacy. At the start of the junta’s rule, society supported the “men on horseback” because they believed it was in the best interest of the country; the general public wanted social chaos to end, they wanted stability. However, as the cost of stability increased through the indiscriminate oppression of any and everyone that opposed the military, so did the military regime’s toleration for opposition. The military’s seemingly indiscriminate violence made people question its actions more and more, and when the military further suppressed those questioning it, it increasingly lost legitimacy with the populace. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Peronist and Radical leaders, as well as trade unions and citizens like the *Madres de la Plaza*,

became more vocal in their opposition to the junta.<sup>98</sup> This increase in cost to the military caused it to tolerate such protests without suppressing them, at least not to the same extent it would have at the beginning of its rule.

The military regime had also lost significant legitimacy (a high cost) because of its failed economic policies. The military had argued, and business elites believed, that free market policies were the panacea the Argentine economy needed. In Chapter Four I showed how the policies that the military regime implemented failed. When Argentina received international loans in 1976 it was hailed as a much needed economic stimulus. However, due to financial mismanagement, unsecured speculative loans, and a recession, Argentina's external debt grew from \$9.9 billion in 1976 to \$49.9 billion in 1983. Although the country's GDP showed some signs of growth over a ten-year period, it was not enough to counter the country's huge external debt. Argentina's IMF account lost nearly one-fifth of its value; by 1983 it had a negative balance of \$2.4 billion. Although unemployment remained within a 2.6 percentage difference from 1973 to 1983, wages actually lost 50 percent of their value in 1982 as compared to a few years prior.<sup>99</sup> Hyperinflation rates were back in the pre-coup 400 and 500 percentage levels; the country was in a worse economic situation than it had been

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<sup>98</sup> Guillermo Makin, "Argentina: The Military Impasse," in *The Political Dilemmas of Military Regimes*, eds. Christopher Clapham and George Philip (London, 1985), p. 165.

<sup>99</sup> Monteón, "Can Argentina's Democracy Survive Economic Disaster?," p. 27.

prior to the military assuming power. Unable to fix the economy as the generals had promised, the populace lost confidence in the military's ability to manage the economy, and therefore its legitimacy became tarnished.

As David Rock argues, "General Galtieri's attempt to reimpose Argentine rule in the Falkland Islands in 1982 was another attempt to fashion a popular base, or deflect popular opposition, on a wave of anti-imperialist sentiment."<sup>100</sup> The junta's military defeat only exacerbated mass opposition to the regime. In my opinion, the cowardly performance by field commanders that fled the battlefield leaving behind their men showed just how unprofessional the Argentine military officers had become. Losing the Malvinas/Falkland Islands War showed that the military could no longer perform its basic military mission: fight and win the nation's wars. Its years of governmental interventions and concentration on its counterinsurgency war created a highly bureaucratized institution that became militarily incompetent. This final blow to its legitimacy indeed cost the junta dearly; it could no longer suppress its opposition and instead had to tolerate the Peronists and others opposed to its authoritarian rule.

Carlos Waisman succinctly summarizes the military's unsuccessful reign of power: "The military regime fell because consent to it collapsed, as a

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<sup>100</sup> Rock, "Political Movements in Argentina," pp. 8-9.

consequence of the defeat in the Malvinas-Falklands War with Britain, the economic catastrophe, and the massive violations of human rights.”<sup>101</sup> Consent collapsed because the military lost all legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. The regime could no longer suppress its opposition because the cost was too high to do so. Therefore, Dahl’s basic axiom – that a government will increasingly tolerate opposition if the expected costs of suppressing the opposition increase – clearly applies to and is validated by the Argentina case.

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<sup>101</sup> Waisman, “The Legitimation of Democracy Under Adverse Conditions,” p. 97.

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## **Vita**

Jesus Fernando Gomez was born in Cananea, Sonora, Mexico, December 30, 1966, the son of Luis Antonio and Adelina Gomez. After living in the Los Angeles, California area for nearly ten years, the family relocated to Tucson, Arizona, where he graduated from Sunnyside High School in 1984 and entered the University of Arizona that same year. He received a Regular Army commission from the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps after graduating as a Distinguished Military Graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in Education degree in 1989. After serving in numerous leadership and management positions in the United States Army, he received a Master of Education degree from the University of Virginia in 1999 while assigned in the Washington, DC area. He is married to the former Ms. Cheryl Ann Bryson, and they have a beautiful daughter, Celina Giselle Gomez. Following graduation from the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, he will attend the prestigious Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

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